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**Sexual Orientation and Harassment:**  
**The Role of Sexism in Predicting Reactions to Harassment**

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## Abstract

Previous research suggests ambivalent sexism may be related to the likelihood of accurately identifying sexual harassment. In the current study, we investigate the relationship between sexism and perceptions of sexual harassment for heterosexual and homosexual targets. Participants ( $n = 233$ ) who were enrolled in a military human relations specialist management course read a short vignette and completed a short questionnaire regarding their reactions to the vignette. The vignettes differed by the sex of the target (male vs. female) and the sexual orientation of the target (heterosexual vs. homosexual). We found that participants who were high in hostile sexism were less likely to judge the complaint made by the target as sexual harassment. However, benevolent sexism was not related to judgment of sexual harassment. We also found that homosexual targets were more likely to be believed when making a complaint of sexual harassment than heterosexual targets. Implications of these findings for the United States military are discussed.

## Sexual Orientation and Harassment:

## The Role of Sexism in Predicting Reactions to Harassment

In 2016, the CEO and Chairman of Fox News, Roger Ailes, was accused of sexual harassment by female employees (Calderone & Grim, 2016) and subsequently resigned on July 21, 2016. Less than a year later Fox's biggest "on-air" talent, Bill O'Reilly was likewise accused of sexual harassment and resigned on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (Pallotta, 2017). These examples highlight the ubiquitous nature of sexual harassment in the United States despite efforts to reduce this type of behavior. While this highly publicized case has once again galvanized attention to the important topic of sexual harassment, it is possible that many victims of sexual harassment remain silent. Why would targets of sexual harassment choose to not report such behavior? While many reasons exist, one possibility is that victims feel their report will be ignored. The current research investigates the possibility that victim reports are sometimes not taken seriously by those who are charged with protecting employees. Thus, when a sexual harassment victim makes a formal report to a supervisor, it is possible that the supervisor ignores the report.

Why would a supervisor ignore a report of sexual harassment? Among the many possible reasons, sexism is a prime candidate for explaining this phenomenon. Recent research seems to suggest that this may in fact be likely to occur. Page, Pina, and Giner-Sorolla (2016) found a positive relationship between sexual harassment myth acceptance and hostile sexism. That is, those who were high in hostile sexism were more likely to subscribe to sexual harassment myth acceptance. Furthermore, men were more likely to accept harassment myth and attribute blame to the female complainant.

The current research focuses on sexual harassment in the military. While we know a great deal about the experiences of women in the workplace in regards to sexual harassment, we know

much less regarding the experiences of men who are sexually harassed in the workplace. Furthermore, the research on same-sex sexual harassment is almost non-existent in the literature. Therefore, the current research focuses not only on reactions to sexual harassment claims made by women but also reactions to claims made by men and by sexual minorities. First, we discuss and conceptualize sexual harassment using a three-construct definition. Next, we review data on sexual harassment in the workplace with a special focus on sexual harassment in the U.S. military. We then discuss the role of sexism in predicting reactions to sexual harassment. Finally, we discuss same-sex sexual harassment.

### *Conceptualizing Sexual Harassment*

Differing interpretations of sexual harassment as a construct make the study of sexual harassment challenging to investigate. The most obvious differences in interpretations seem to be contingent on gender, as shown by Rotundo, Nguyen, and Sackett (2001), and on sexual orientation as DeSouza and Solberg (2007) described in their research. According to O’Leary-Kelly, Bowes-Speery, Bates, and Lean (2009), initial research on sexual harassment focused on two basic definitions of sexual harassment: legal harassment and psychological harassment. Legal harassment included two aspects: “quid pro quo” and “hostile work environment.” Quid pro quo harassment occurs when employment-related decisions (e.g., valued assignments) are based on one’s compliance with requests for sexual favors. For example, a supervisor may promise an employee a valued promotion if he/she agrees to go out on a date. Conversely, a hostile work environment exists when sex-related behavior creates an intimidating or hostile environment (e.g., sex jokes). This type of environment may be riddled with seemingly harmless micro-aggressions aimed at gender or sexuality that can emerge into something very detrimental

to workplace harmony and efficiency. Coping with these work environments can be extremely difficult when a person realizes that their gender or sexuality is becoming the target of ridicule.

Although legal scholars have used this two-factor conceptualization of sexual harassment for several decades, social scientists have found that a three-factor conceptualization of sexual harassment may be more useful for understanding the complexities of the construct. Fitzgerald and colleagues (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Fitzgerald, Magley, Drasgow, & Waldo, 1999) identified three sexual harassment constructs that are useful for researching differential sexual harassment experiences (see Dionisi, Barling, & Dupre, 2012 for review).

The first factor, *gender harassment*, includes behavior (both verbal and nonverbal) that is insulting, hostile, or degrading towards women. It can include sexist jokes, comments about women not belonging in the workplace, or crude terms that denigrate women. The second factor, *unwanted sexual attention*, includes the expression of sexual interest that is unwelcome or offensive to the target. It can include unwanted touching or pressure for dates after repeated rebuffs. Finally, the third factor, *sexual coercion*, includes bribes or threats toward the target that make promises of employment outcomes (e.g., promotions or job termination) contingent on the target's sexual cooperation (Leskinen, Cortina, & Kabat, 2011).

While unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion may be part of the same continuum, with sexual coercion being an extreme form of unwanted sexual attention, gender harassment seems to be completely independent of the other two. That is, gender harassment does not include sexual interest of the target. Instead, it includes behavior that intends to insult or reject women. Gender harassment, though seemingly innocuous, is the most common form of sexual harassment (Leskinen et al., 2011). It comes in many forms, some of which are considered "normal" (e.g., jokes) and are so common that they are rarely reported. Some authors have

further distinguished “sexist” gender harassment as any comment made with direct disdain toward a gender (ex: calling a woman a “bitch”; Konik & Cortina, 2008, p. 320).

Research using the three-factor conceptualization of sexual harassment indicates that sexual coercion is the least common form of sexual harassment while gender harassment is the most common (Parker & Griffin, 2002). Indeed, approximately 32% of the female respondents and 13% of the male respondents in the current study indicated they had experienced Gender Harassment in the past twelve months, while only 5% of female respondents and 4% of male respondents indicated they had experienced Sexual Coercion in the past twelve months. Since women are more likely to experience gender harassment than unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion, we focus our research at that level of harassment. Thus, in the current study, we investigate reactions to gender harassment. Specifically, we investigate the likelihood that participants will believe claims of gender harassment.

### *Review of the Research on Sexual Harassment*

A great deal of research on sexual harassment has accumulated over the past thirty years. Much of that literature focuses on sexual harassment of women. This is not surprising given the large percentage of women who have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. Indeed, Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, and Stibal (2003) report that 58% of women have experienced sexual harassment. Even more alarming, Piotrkowski (1998) report that 72% of women reported experiencing gender harassment. Some estimates indicate that approximately 50% of women will experience sexual harassment at least once during their working lives (Fitzgerald, et al., 1988).

While most researchers have used a global conceptualization of sexual harassment in determining the effects of sexual harassment on organizational outcomes (e.g., Barling et al.,

2001; Culbertson & Rosenfeld, 1994; Richman, Shinsako, Rospenda, Flaherty, & Freels, 2002), a handful of studies have investigated the effects of the individual sexual harassment factors. Murry, Sivasubramaniam, and Jacques (2001) found that gender harassment was negatively related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment for women and job satisfaction for men. Swim, Hyers, Cohen, and Ferguson (2001) asked participants to track the instances of ordinary sexist behavior (e.g., sexist jokes) and found that such behaviors were associated with greater anger, anxiety, and depression. They argue that those types of behaviors may elicit feelings of stereotype threat (see Steele & Aronson, 1995). Furthermore, Piotrkowski (1998) found that gender harassment was associated with job dissatisfaction and stress.

It is possible that women who are employed in traditionally male jobs are more likely to experience sexual harassment than women who are employed in stereotypically female jobs. The U.S. military is one such organization in which women are employed in stereotypically masculine job domains. Not surprisingly, researchers have found that sexual harassment is fairly common in the U.S. military. The Department of Defense (DoD) found that 23% of women and 4% of men reported experiencing sexual harassment in 2012 (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2012). More recently, the 2014 RAND Military Workplace Study found that approximately 116,600 active-duty service members experienced sexual harassment in 2013. Of those who reported experiencing sexual harassment, 22% were women and 7% were men. Furthermore, military personnel who are sexually harassed appear to be more at risk of being sexually assaulted. Military members who experienced sexual harassment or gender discrimination were more likely to be the target of sexual assault, and about 33% of those who were sexually assaulted indicated that they had been sexually harassed prior to the assault.

It is likely that these percentages underestimate the actual occurrence of both sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military. Using direct measurement approaches, Rosen and Martin (1998) found that 37% of Army women reported that they had been sexually harassed during the previous year while Culbertson and Rosenfeld (1994, 1996) found that 40% of Navy women and 30% of Marine Corps women reported sexual harassment in the previous year. However, when indirect methods are used, the percentage of military members who have experienced sexual harassment skyrockets. For example, in a large study of U.S. military personnel Bastian, Lancaster, and Reyst (1996) found that 78% of women in the U.S. military experienced sexual harassment during the previous year.

Surveying military veterans has also provided evidence on the ubiquity of sexual trauma (e.g., sexual assault) in the military. Data indicate that nearly 21% of women and 1% of men report some type of sexual trauma during military deployments (Military Sexual Trauma Support Team, 2012). Barth and colleagues (2016) analyzed data from 60,000 veterans and found that 40% of women and 4% of men who served during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom reported experiencing sexual trauma during their service, with men who were exposed to combat being three times more likely to report experiencing sexual assault. More recently, Gibson, Gray, Katon, Simpson, and Lehavot (2016) surveyed female military veterans and found that 39% reported experiencing sexual assault and 74% reported experiencing sexual harassment.

While the majority of sexual harassment research has focused on female targets, there is an increasing acknowledgement that men are often the targets of sexual harassment (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2001; Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996). Research in 2004 (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board) found that approximately 15% of men have experienced sexual harassment in



the workplace. Even more striking, Antecol and Cobb-Clark (2001) found that more than 35% of military men have experienced sexual harassment every year. Settles, Buchanan, and Colar (2012) further investigated how military men experience sexual harassment. They found that Black men are more likely to experience sexual harassment than White men. While these percentages are not as startling as those of women, it would be irresponsible for researchers to ignore the experiences of men as targets of sexual harassment.

Although it is true that men experience sexual harassment, it is likely that they experience that harassment differently than women. In fact, Konic and Cortina (2008) found that women and men who experienced sexual harassment in the form of unwanted advances received an equal number of comments that were derogatory toward their gender. However, it is possible that men are less likely to perceive such comments as sexual harassment. Researchers (e.g., Berdahl et al., 1996; Cochran, Frazier, & Olson, 1997; Parker & Griffin, 2002) have found that men do not report some sexual harassment behaviors as problematic. In fact, it is possible that many of the anxiety-provoking experiences for women are actually flattering or welcome for men. Sexual harassment of men may become problematic when it threatens their male gender role.

Given the high number of Service Members who may experience sexual harassment in the military, it is important to understand how first-line supervisors and/or Equal Opportunity (EO) Managers respond to claims of sexual harassment. Research (Campbell, 2008; Firestone & Harris, 2003) indicates that making an official report to authorities is the least common response to sexual harassment. In fact, research consistently indicates that the most common strategy used by women who are harassed is avoidance (Cammaert, 1985; Maypole, 1986; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gutek, 1985; Magley, 2002). Why do targets of sexual harassment not report their experience? Some of the common barriers identified by military personnel include concerns

about confidentiality of the report, fear of retaliation, fear that their claim will not be believed, and fear that nothing will be done to the perpetrator.

Unfortunately, these fears may be based on real-world experiences. In the U.S. Merit Systems (1988) study, 50% of federal employees who had experienced harassment reported their experience to authorities, but less than half of those individuals indicated that reporting was an effective strategy for resolving the sexual harassment. Later, Firestone and Harris (2003) found that about half of all military personnel said that reporting the sexual harassment either made no difference in the harassment or that it actually made it worse. Other research shows similar problems, with both military and civilian victims experiencing retaliation from perpetrators, negative career outcomes, and loss of coworker support after making official claims of sexual harassment (Campbell, 2008; Cochran, Frazier, & Olson, 1997; Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995).

The reluctance to report sexual harassment may be even more pronounced in the U.S. military. In a 2012 survey, 7% of female respondents indicated they had experienced unwanted sexual contact during the previous 12 months. However, only 33% of those women reported the sexual assault to authorities. Mengeling, Booth, Torner, and Sadler (2014) interviewed 1,339 servicewomen and found that 18% of active duty women and 12% of women in the reserves experienced sexual assault in the military. However, only 29% of active duty women and 19% of women in the reserves reported their experiences to their supervisors. Those who chose the unrestricted reporting option (e.g., law enforcement and command structure are notified and a criminal investigation is initiated) reported some negative experiences, including the loss of confidentiality, being told that they should “forget about it” (p. 21), and being told that the sexual assault was their own fault. For those who did not report (75%), reasons given were that they did

not know how to report, they were too embarrassed to report, they were afraid reporting would negatively affect their career, they did not think anything would be done, they were concerned about confidentiality, and they blamed themselves for the sexual assault.

It is also possible that targets of sexual harassment and sexual assault choose not to report their experiences because they fear retaliation. The 2014 RAND Military Workplace Study found that nearly 60% of sexual harassment violations were committed by the targets' supervisor. Furthermore, over 50% of those who did report a sexual assault were the targets of professional and/or social retaliation after they reported the assault. However, those who chose not to report their experiences were primarily motivated not by fear of retaliation, but because they believed the experience was not serious enough to report, or because they wanted to forget about the experience (2014).

Campbell and Raja (2005) studied the experiences of 23 female veterans who had reported sexual assault while actively on duty in the military. Seventy percent reported that they had been encouraged to drop the charges and were told that their cases were not serious enough to litigate and 65% were told that they could not make an official report. Additionally, 30% were asked about their sexual history, 26% were asked about the way they were dressed during the alleged attack, and 17% were told they needed to take a lie detector test. It is likely that these types of experiences cause some targets of sexual harassment to refrain from making official reports of their experiences. Given the results of these studies, it becomes important to understand why some supervisors or EO managers do not take claims of harassment seriously. Sexism is one possible reason that we explore in the current study.

### *Sexism and Sexual Harassment*

Although sexism was traditionally defined as possessing hostile attitudes or engaging in hostile behavior towards women (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), this view of sexism ignores the possibility that sexists may simultaneously express positive and negative attitudes/behaviors toward women. Glick and Fiske (1996) suggest that sexism should be viewed as a multidimensional construct that includes both hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism consists of ideals that are hostile such as the belief that women seek to gain power over men and that women fail to appreciate everything that men do for them. Conversely, benevolent sexism is defined as, “a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone” (p. 491). Furthermore, benevolent sexism tends to precipitate behavior that is typically considered helpful or used to elicit intimacy. Although the behavior might evoke positive feelings for the perceiver, benevolent sexism can also be harmful to the target. For example, a man’s offer to carry something heavy for a female coworker might cause the female to feel weaker than her male counterparts. Though well-intentioned, such behavior may proliferate stereotypes about women as the weaker sex.

According to ambivalent sexism theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), hostile and benevolent sexism are separate, but positively correlated factors. This indicates that one might experience both benevolent sexism as well as hostile sexism. In fact, since those factors are correlated, it is likely that the individual who experiences benevolent sexism also experiences hostile sexism. However, it is also true that hostile sexism better predicts possession of negative stereotypes about women while benevolent sexism predicts positive stereotypes about women (Glick et al., 2000). For example, hostile sexism might predict stereotypes that women are weak or

unintelligent. On the other hand, benevolent sexism might predict stereotypes that women are soft and compassionate.

As mentioned prior, ambivalent sexism theory suggests that individuals can simultaneously experience both subjectively positive and hostile reactions toward women. Although various measures have been used to assess attitudes toward women (e.g., the Attitudes Toward Women Scale; & Helmreich 1973; the Modern Sexism Scale and the Old-Fashioned Sexism Scale; Swim, Aiken, Hall, & Hunter, 1995, and the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; Burt, 1980), those measures have not tapped the possibility that individuals experience subjectively positive feelings toward women. In fact, prior to the conceptualization of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996), sexism was viewed only as a hostile reaction toward women. The ASI provides an opportunity to investigate the possibility that individuals hold both subjectively positive as well as negative attitudes toward women.

The ASI has, to date, been used primarily as a tool to assess attitudes, rather than make predictions about specific targets. Initially, Glick and Fiske (1996) conducted a number of validity studies, and found that, in general, hostile sexism correlated highly with other hostile measures of sexism while benevolent sexism did not. Furthermore, they found that hostile sexism correlated strongly with negative affect and negative stereotypes toward women while benevolent sexism correlated strongly with positive affect and positive stereotypes of women.

Most research using the ASI indicates that individuals can experience both positive and hostile reactions toward women. What is less clear is how hostile sexism and benevolent sexism can be experienced toward a single target. That is, previous research using ambivalent sexism theory has focused exclusively on the possibility that individuals can experience both hostile and

benevolent reactions toward different groups of women. For example, an individual might feel hostility toward a feminist yet feel benevolence toward a homemaker. It is less clear how individuals might feel both hostile sexism and benevolent sexism toward the *same target*. Is it possible for an individual to feel both hostility and benevolence toward a single target?

One might also experience both hostile sexism and benevolent sexism simultaneously. This could occur when individuals classify women into some type of category but are faced with a target that crosses category boundaries. For example, in the current study, a woman who in the military might be categorized as a career military woman which goes against the female gender role might be the subject of hostile sexism. However, a woman who is being sexually harassed may need to be protected from the antagonist and thus might be the subject of benevolent sexism. When an individual is faced with a woman who is categorized as a career woman and as filling the traditional role of needing protection, it is likely that the individual experiences feelings of ambivalence. That individual might feel hostility toward the target because she is filling an untraditional role as a career military woman while also feeling benevolently toward the target because of her need to be protected.

Research also shows that sexism is linked to perceptions of sexual harassment. Wiener and Hurt (2000) asked full-time employees to view video re-enactments of an equal employment opportunity officer interviewing workers involved in a sexual harassment claim. Participants were then asked to judge the evidence of sexual harassment. They found that participants high in hostile sexism found less evidence of sexual harassment than those who were low in hostile sexism. Given previous research showing a strong link between hostile sexism and perceptions of sexual harassment, we believe that those who are high in hostile sexism will be less likely to

believe a sexual harassment claim made by an employee should be taken seriously. Specifically, we predict that:

*H1: There will be a main effect of hostile sexism such that participants high in hostile sexism will be less likely to believe the claim of sexual harassment than those low in hostile sexism.*

Research on the relationship between benevolent sexism and sexual harassment is less consistent than research showing a link between hostile sexism and perceptions of sexual harassment (O'Connor, Gutek, Stockdale, Geer, & Melancon, 2004; Russel & Trigg, 2004). However, recent research indicates that there may be a positive relationship between benevolent sexism and tolerance for sexual harassment. Wiener and colleagues (2010) found that those high in benevolent sexism found less evidence of sexual harassment than those who scored low in benevolent sexism. Similarly, Russell and Trigg (2004) found that those high in benevolent sexism are more likely to tolerate sexual harassment. Given the results of previous research showing a positive link between benevolent sexism and tolerance of sexual harassment, we predict that:

*H2: There will be a main effect of benevolent sexism such that participants high in benevolent sexism will be less likely to believe the claim of sexual harassment than those low in benevolent sexism.*

### *Same Sex Sexual Harassment*

Harassment of sexual minorities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals [LGBT]) can also occur in the workplace. Croteau (1996) reported that between 25-66% of sexual minorities experienced discrimination in the workplace due to their sexual orientation. Herek (2009) found that over 50% of sexual minorities report experiencing verbal abuse while 11% report experiencing housing or employment discrimination. Same sex sexual harassment has been found to typically be a product of heterosexist attitudes and environments (Fineran, 2002). Using insults that jab at men for being “woman-like” often creates these conditions. Even if the target of an insult is heterosexual, the insult itself establishes an atmosphere where homosexuality (as well as being female) is denigrated. Shaming someone for acting “gay” even when they are not makes it clear that being gay is not favorable. Same-sex sexual harassment also encompasses comments made directly to an LGB individual concerning his/her sexuality. Though these comments are sometimes insults, they may also be suggestive or inappropriate in a sexual nature.

According to Ryan and Wessel (2012), sexual orientation harassment includes any unwanted behavior directed toward an individual in the workplace based on the sexual orientation (real or perceived) of the target. This harassment could include verbal harassment (e.g., the use of derogatory language) or it could include physical harassment (e.g., purposeful exclusion from workplace activities). Konik and Cortina (2008) describe heterosexist harassment as “verbal, physical, and symbolic behaviors that convey hostile and offensive attitudes about one’s actual or perceived lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity” (p. 315). This conceptualization of harassment includes both overt behaviors (e.g., being fired from a job due to one’s sexual orientation) and “ambient” behaviors (e.g., telling or laughing at anti-gay jokes). While Konik and Cortina (2008) acknowledge that heterosexist harassment is similar to gender harassment,



they note one important difference between the two. Heterosexist harassment conveys hostility about sexual minority identities regardless of whether the target is a sexual minority. This is an important distinction because it can penalize non-sexual minorities (e.g., heterosexual men and women) who do not ascribe to traditional gender roles. In other words, a heterosexual man with stereotypically feminine features or behaviors may be the target of heterosexist harassment. In their research Konik and Cortina (2008) found that heterosexist harassment was strongly related to gender harassment.

The study of harassment of sexual minorities in the workplace is fairly complex. According to Ryan and Wessel (2012), there are three ways in which sexual orientation harassment differs from harassment based on sex or race. First, there is limited federal protection for sexual minorities. While harassment based on race and gender is prohibited by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sexual orientation harassment remains legal in most locations in the United States. However, the Supreme Court ruled that same sex sexual harassment is unlawful (Knapp & Kustis, 2000). Second, sexual orientation is often believed to be controllable (Horvath & Ryan, 2003; King, 2001; Whitley, 1990) while race and sex are clearly innate. Third, sexual orientation is not always known. It is possible that the use of jokes or derogatory language by organizational members is not specifically targeted toward gay or lesbian coworkers but rather reflects a climate of heterosexism.

Regardless of the intent, sexual orientation harassment can create a hostile work environment for sexual minorities. Research indicates that a workplace in which jokes, innuendos, and slurs against a group create a hostile work environment even when those actions are not directed at specific targets (Minor-Rubino, & Cortina, 2004; Raver & Gelfand, 2005). For example, a gay man who has not disclosed his sexual orientation to coworkers can still

experience hostility when those coworkers unwittingly use derogatory or heterosexist language. In fact, Miller, Forest, and Jurik (2003) found that closeted and out gay and lesbian police officers experienced a hostile work environment due to the heterosexist environment of the police department.

It is possible that harassment of sexual minorities is underreported due to the possibility that harassment will increase with disclosure. Ragins (2008) found that most sexual minorities do not disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace. One reason for this lack of disclosure could be fear of increased harassment (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). It is also possible that third parties fail to report sexual orientation harassment because they do not perceive the behavior as threatening to sexual minorities. Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) found that behavior is not always labeled as stigmatizing if it is not directed toward specific targets. For example, one may not believe a gay-related joke constitutes harassment if that joke is not directed towards a specific individual. In fact, Ryan and Wessel (2012) found that observers are more likely to intervene in sexual orientation harassment when they believed there was a clear intent to harm.

While the research on the harassment of sexual minorities in the workplace has grown considerably in the past two decades, there is little research on same-sex sexual harassment. Waldo, Berdahl, and Fitzgerald (1998) found that in a survey of 1,007 men, 40-53% reported having been harassed by other men. Similarly, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board of 1995 found that 3% of women and 22% of men who reported harassment were targets of same-sex sexual harassment. It is possible that same-sex harassment increases in occupations that are predominately male. Knapp and Kustis (2000) found an overwhelming majority of same-sex harassment claims in the U.S. Army to be reported by men. This harassment has a real-life cost

for organizations. Research shows that the U.S. Army spends more than \$95,000,000 annually handling same-sex sexual harassment claims (Faley, et al., 2006). Clearly, it is in the best interest of the Armed Forces to ensure same sex harassment is taken seriously.

While research on sexual harassment of sexual minorities is more complex, several researchers have reported that sexual minorities may actually be more likely to be believed when claiming sexual harassment than heterosexual targets. DeSouza and Solberg (2004) investigated reactions to man-to-man heterosexist behavior (e.g., derogatory language aimed at the target). In their research, they manipulated the sexual orientation of the target (half of the participants read a scenario in which the target was heterosexual and half read a scenario in which the target was homosexual). Participants in their study rated the incident as more harassing when the target was gay rather than when the target was heterosexual. Thus, we hypothesized the following:

*H3: There will be a main effect of target sexual orientation such that participants will be more likely to believe the homosexual target than the heterosexual target.*

It is possible that sexism (both benevolent and hostile) and target orientation interact. If participants who are high in sexism are less likely to judge behavior as harassment, and if participants are less likely to judge behavior as harassment if the target is heterosexual, one would expect those who are high in sexism to be less likely to judge behavior as harassment if the target is heterosexual. Conversely, one would expect those low in sexism to be more likely to judge behavior as harassment if the target is homosexual. Indeed, limited research suggests such an interaction. DeSouza, Solberg, and Elder (2007) found that those who are high in hostile sexism are more likely to judge behavior as sexual harassment for female-female sexual

harassment. Therefore, we predict that there will be an interaction between sexism and target orientation. Specifically, we predict that:

*H4a: There will be an interaction between sexual orientation and benevolent sexism such that those who are high in benevolent sexism will be less likely to believe behavior is harassment when the target is heterosexual.*

*H4b: There will interaction between sexual orientation and hostile sexism such that those who are high in hostile sexism will be less likely to believe behavior is harassment when the target is heterosexual.*

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Data were collected from three resident classes at the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI). A human relations course is taught three times each year at DEOMI. During the course, students are asked to voluntarily participate in a number of research studies sponsored by the Hope Research Center. Each course had an enrollment of approximately 100 students.

A total of 233 participants completed the survey ( $n = 76$  for the first collection,  $n = 76$  for the second collection, and  $n = 81$  for the third collection). Seventy-one percent of participants were male ( $n = 165$ ), eighteen percent were female ( $n = 43$ ), while eleven percent declined to answer. The majority of participants (52%) were between 30-39 years old while 22% were between 40-49 years old. Three-quarters (75%) of participants indicated their religious affiliation was Christian while 25% indicated they were non-Christian (e.g., Muslim, Jewish,

Hindu, Atheist, and non-religious). Finally, 83% of the sample indicated their sexual orientation was heterosexual while 5% identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Twelve percent of participants declined to answer this survey item.

## **Procedures**

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental groups. After students agreed to participate, they were given a link to an online survey. All participants read a short vignette that asked them to imagine they were an Equal Opportunity (EO) manager at their base and that a junior enlisted member was considering filing a formal complaint because other unit members were telling jokes that were offensive. Vignettes differed by sex (male versus female) and sexual orientation (heterosexual versus homosexual). An example of the homosexual female vignette is:

“Imagine you are the EO manager at your military base. Yesterday a junior enlisted member came to your office to discuss a situation. She told you that other members of her unit often tell lesbian jokes that she finds demeaning. She tells you that her wife thinks she should file a formal complaint, but she is unsure what she should do.”

After reading the vignette, participants were instructed to complete several survey instruments that measured their reactions to the target in the vignette as well as several attitudinal measures.

## **Measures**

Since the current study did not have an established measure of participants' reactions, we developed our own questionnaire to measure the degree that participants believed the complaint of the junior enlisted member and their likelihood of taking action. We developed the instrument

such that seven items would measure participant belief and seven items would measure participant actions.

We subsequently conducted an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Components factor analysis with a Varimax Rotation. We included all of the Belief and Action items. We chose to retain only the first three factors for two reasons. First, a scree plot indicates that there are three factors. Second, the percent of variance drops significantly after the third factor (see Table 1). Together, these three factors accounted for 54.36% of the variance. As shown in Table 2, the three factor solution that was generated did not fully group into the two predicted Belief and Action constructs.

As shown in Table 2, Factor 1 contained nine items. Seven of the nine items come from our Belief inventory while two of the items come from our Action inventory. These items had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74, suggesting good reliability. Factor 2 included three action-oriented items and had a Cronbach's alpha of .45. Factor 3 contained two action-oriented items and had a Cronbach's alpha of .37.

Due to unanticipated results that emerged from the factor analysis, we also conducted analyses using our original two developed constructs (Belief and Action), each of which included seven items. The Belief construct had high reliability ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ); however, the internal reliability for the Action construct was unacceptably low ( $\alpha = .37$ ). The results of the factor analysis and the low interrater reliability of the Action construct led us to discard the Action construct for the current study and concentrate only on the Belief construct.

**Belief.** Seven items measured participant belief in the harassment claim ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Participants rated their agreement with each statement using a 7-point Likert-type scale in which

(1) = “Strongly Disagree” and (7) = “Strongly agree”. An example statement from this measure is “I believe the junior enlisted member should just ignore the jokes.”

**Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996).** The 22-item ASI was used to measure participants’ trait level of benevolent and hostile sexism. This self-report measure includes 11 items for hostile sexism and 11 items for benevolent sexism (see below for description of each). The two factors (hostile sexism and benevolent sexism) are typically moderately correlated, though hostile sexism usually predicts negative attitudes and stereotypes about women while benevolent sexism typically predicts positive attitudes and stereotypes about women (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997).

**Hostile Sexism.** Eleven items measured participants’ level of hostile sexism ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Using a 7-point Likert-type scale in which (1) = “Strongly Disagree” and (7) = “Strongly agree”, participants rated their agreement with each item. An example from this measure is “When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.” A median split was conducted to split the sample into two groups. The “High Hostile Sexism” group included anyone with a mean score of 3.28 or higher for hostile sexism. The “Low Hostile Sexism” group included participants with a mean score lower than 3.28 on hostile sexism.

**Benevolent Sexism.** Eleven items measured participant’s level of benevolent sexism ( $\alpha = .63$ ). Using a 7-point Likert-type scale in which (1) = “Strongly Disagree” and (7) = “Strongly agree”, participants rated their agreement with each item. An example from this measure is “Women should be cherished and protected by men.” A median split was conducted to split the sample into two groups. The “High Benevolent Sexism” group included anyone with a mean

score of 4.00 or higher for hostile sexism. The “Low Benevolent Sexism” group included participants with a mean score lower than 4.00 on hostile sexism.

## Results

We used an independent samples *t*-test to investigate our prediction that those high in hostile sexism would be less likely to judge behavior as sexual harassment while those low in hostile sexism would be more likely to judge behavior as sexual harassment. Results indicate that participants high in hostile sexism ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) were less likely to believe the claim of harassment than those low in hostile sexism ( $M = 1.53$ ,  $SD = .66$ ,  $t(203) = .534$ ,  $p < .000$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

We used an independent samples *t*-test to investigate our prediction that those high in benevolent sexism would be less likely to judge behavior as sexual harassment while those low in benevolent sexism would be more likely to judge behavior as sexual harassment. Results indicate that participants high in benevolent sexism ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) were not less likely to believe the claim of harassment than those low in benevolent sexism ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = .87$ ,  $t(203) = .35$ ,  $p = .729$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

We used an independent samples *t*-test to investigate our prediction that participants would be more likely to believe the homosexual target than the heterosexual target. We found a main effect for target orientation such that participants were more likely to believe the homosexual target ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = .83$ ) than the heterosexual target ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = .90$ ,  $t(204) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .024$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.



Finally, we predicted there would be interactions between sexism and target orientation. Specifically, we predicted that hostile sexism and target orientation would interact such that those who were high in hostile sexism would be least likely to judge the behavior as harassment when the target was heterosexual. The results did not support this hypothesis. We also predicted that benevolent sexism and target orientation would interact such that those who were high in benevolent sexism would be least likely to judge the behavior as harassment. The results also did not support this hypothesis.

### **Discussion**

The current study investigates the possibility that sexism is related to perceptions of sexual harassment. Specifically, we believed that aspects of ambivalent sexism would predict reactions to sexual harassment. Previous research (Wiener & Hurt, 2000) indicates that those who are high in hostile sexism may be less likely to correctly identify sexual harassment. Although the research on benevolent sexism is less consistent (O'Connor, Gutek, Stockdale, Geer, & Melancon, 2004; Russel & Trigg, 2004), Wiener and colleagues (2010) found that those who are high in benevolent sexism may also be less likely to correctly and accurately judge behavior as sexual harassment.

The current research is unique in that we ask students enrolled in a Military human relations specialist course to make judgments of claims of sexual harassment. Furthermore, our research focuses on one of the most likely forms of sexual harassment: gender harassment. While seemingly less pernicious, gender harassment is the most common form of sexual harassment (Leskinen et al., 2011). Our first hypothesis, which predicted that those who were high in hostile sexism would be less likely to judge behavior described in the vignette as sexual harassment, was

supported. This is important because it indicates that those who have more overt disdain for women may be less likely to believe that sexual harassment has occurred. However, our second hypothesis, which predicted the same relationship for benevolent sexism, was not supported. While somewhat surprising given the recent research by Weiner et al. (2010), this finding is consistent with other research which has found no relationship between benevolent sexism and perceptions of sexual harassment.

We did find support for our third hypothesis, that participants would believe sexual minorities more than heterosexual targets. While this may be surprising given the general bias against sexual minorities, previous research (DeSouza & Solberg, 2004) found that gay men are more believed when making complaints of sexual harassment than heterosexual men. Our research finds this is true regardless of the gender of the target. That is, heterosexual women are less likely to be believed when making a claim of sexual harassment than lesbians. This is the first known research to find this relationship.

Somewhat surprisingly, we did not find support for our hypotheses that there would be an interaction between sexual orientation of the target and sexism. While we found main effects for both sexual orientation and hostile sexism, the expected interaction did not emerge. It seems that people who are high in hostile sexism are less likely to believe gender harassment constitutes sexual harassment regardless of the target of the sexual orientation of the target.

## **Implications**

Sexual harassment continues to be a serious problem in the U.S. military (RAND, 2014). Recent research (Barth et al., 2016) found a high percentage of women (40%) experienced some type of sexual trauma while deployed. Even more alarming, Gibson et al. (2016) found that 39%

of their military sample reported experiencing sexual assault and 74% reported experiencing some type of sexual harassment. Indeed, current research indicates that sexual harassment has remained somewhat constant in the military over the past two decades despite repeated and admirable attempts to curb that type of behavior (Harris, 2016).

The current research shows one mechanism that might explain the continued sexual harassment in the military. It is possible that the reluctance of supervisors to believe subordinate claims of sexual harassment fosters a climate conducive to continued sexual harassment. That is, if the targets of sexual harassment believe they will not be believed when they do make a claim of harassment, they may be less likely to make the efforts to make a claim. This sends a message to the perpetrator of sexual harassment that the harassment is condoned by the target and by the organization. Indeed, research shows that the most common reaction to being sexually harassed is to ignore that harassment (Campbell, 2008; Firestone & Harris, 2003). The current research provides empirical support for many of the fears that women report when considering making a claim of sexual harassment.

As mentioned prior, about half of all military personnel said that reporting the sexual harassment either made no difference in the harassment or that it actually made it worse (Firestone & Harris, 2003). The current research finds that hostile sexism may be one reason that a supervisor would ignore the complaint. The fear that reporting sexual harassment will be ineffective may have merit. A supervisor who is high in hostile sexism may actually be more likely to ignore the claim of sexual harassment or even tell the claimant that they should ignore the harassment. As Mengeling et al. (2014) found, some targets of sexual harassment are actually told that they should forget about the harassment or that the harassment may be their own fault.

Our research indicates that hostile sexism may be at least partially to blame for ignoring claims of sexual harassment.

The implications of this finding is especially important for the military. If the U.S. military hopes to reduce instances of sexual harassment, it must foster a climate that protects targets of harassment, not just from retaliation, but from the very people that the target seeks for protection. The military has admirably taken great strides in helping targets of sexual harassment through their efforts to decrease harassment. However, if a supervisor or EO manager ignores the claim of a subordinate, a mixed message is being sent to all military members. That is, commanders talk about the importance of decreasing sexual harassment, yet the people charged with helping targets of harassment may not be protecting those targets as they should.

Hostile sexism, even at its mildest, can make targets in the workplace feel unappreciated and unwelcome. When jokes are made without penalty at the expense of a gender or sexuality, workers interpret the underlying attitudes. They associate the environment with negative ideas about women or homosexuality and it affects their morale and performance. They feel even more discouraged by the knowledge that their efforts to complain would be futile. This cycle is extremely detrimental to employers.

A study of the antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment (Cantisano, Dominguez, & Depolo, 2008) identified organizational environmental factors as the main predictor of workplace harassment. Workplaces must take responsibility for the atmospheres they create for employees and resources they provide to them. A review of current strategies used to reduce workplace mistreatment explains that clear and regularly stressed policies are a fundamental part of an effective plan (Buchanan, Settles, Hall, & O'Connor, 2014). An

organization must ensure that its sexual harassment report protocol is clear and free of corruption. Regular self-assessment is recommended for workplaces to understand their employees' opinions. This is crucial to creating a safe, comfortable, and effective work environment as well as to building successful, smooth-running organizations. Taking sexual harassment seriously is not only a wise business choice but a necessary social duty that must begin at the root of the motivation behind sexually harassing words and actions.

One way to address this issue is to screen EO managers for their sexist beliefs. Those who are high in hostile sexism could be detected and counseled. However, given the complexity of screening individuals for specific jobs, it may not be practical to administer screening tests on a large scale in the U.S. military. However, while it may be impractical to screen all EO managers and supervisors for sexist attitudes, it is important that commanders and EO managers are aware of their attitudes and the effects that those attitudes may have on their assessment of sexual harassment claims. Simple awareness of one's own attitudes may help those individuals to make more objective assessments of sexual harassment claims.

Of particular importance in the current research, we found that gay and lesbian individuals are more likely to be believed when making a claim of sexual harassment than heterosexual individuals. This also has implications for the military, especially in a time of transition as sexual minorities are able to serve openly in the military. It is likely that sexual minorities will experience harassment as they feel more comfortable being open in the workplace. The current research suggests that commanders may not have to worry about this issue as much because EO managers and supervisors may take sexual harassment claims of sexual minorities seriously. However, the flip side of this is problematic for heterosexual

individuals who are sexually harassed. How can the military ensure that all targets of sexual harassment are taken seriously?

Finally, it may be of interest to military commanders that we did not hypothesize that there would be a gender effect. That is, we did not predict that women would be more likely to judge behavior as harassment than men. This was a purposeful omission. While previous research shows that women may be more likely to judge unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion as sexual harassment than men, the same does not hold true for gender harassment (Hernandez, Harris, Harris, & Farmer, 2016); Gutek & O'Connor, 1995). This is important because it suggests that it does not matter if the EO manager or supervisor is a man or a woman when it comes to gender harassment. Likewise, the gender of the target does not matter in terms of believability. We did not hypothesize a difference between male and female targets because research has not consistently suggested a gender difference in terms of the sexual harassment target.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are a number of limitations in the current research that should be addressed in future research. First, the self-developed measure of participant reaction did not come out as we had predicted. While there was a strong “belief” construct, but the “action” construct did not emerge as we hoped it would. Therefore, we are unable to predict behavior of participants. While it is important to know that hostile sexism is negatively related to belief of a sexual harassment claim, we cannot reliably say what happens next. Would participants take action despite their reservations on the seriousness of the accusation, or would they do nothing as previous research

suggests? Unfortunately, we are unable to answer that question in the current research. We believe future research should try to find a better measure of intended action.

The convenience sample that we used for the current research is another limitation. All of the participants were enrolled in a human relations specialist course. It is possible that these individuals were primed to be more egalitarian in their reactions to sexual harassment claims simply because they are enrolled in a course that addresses sexual harassment and because many of them have human resources/personnel backgrounds. It is possible that we would find a different reaction from practicing EO managers in the military. However, one of the more important findings of the current research is that the very people meant to protect targets of sexual harassment may be hampered by their sexist beliefs. While it would be interesting to know how coworkers would react to claims of sexual harassment, the implications of the current research are more important because these are the people who would actually be responsible for taking action for the claimant on the sexual harassment claim.

Finally, we investigated only one aspect of sexual harassment: gender harassment. It is possible that reactions to sexual harassment by EO professionals differs depending on the perceived seriousness of the claim. A claim of quid-pro-quo may be taken more seriously regardless of sexist attitudes than a claim of unwanted sexual attention or a claim of gender harassment. Although we purposefully used gender harassment due to the ubiquity of gender harassment in the military, it would be valuable to know how EO managers would react to these other types of harassment. Furthermore, the current research was unable to test the possibility that women could have different definitions and/or criteria for harassment than men. Future research could easily address these concern by changing the nature of the vignette to include different types of sexual harassment claims.

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***Table 1. Initial Factors and Percent Variance for Exploratory Factor Analysis.***

| Component | Eigenvalue | % Variance | Cumulative % |
|-----------|------------|------------|--------------|
| 1         | 4.63       | 33.01      | 33.01        |
| 2         | 1.75       | 12.49      | 45.55        |
| 3         | 1.23       | 8.03       | 52.65        |
| 4         | .958       | 6.85       | 54.36        |
| 5         | .906       | 6.47       | 67.67        |
| 6         | .871       | 6.20       | 73.89        |

**Table 2. Rotated Principle Components Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation for Exploratory Factor Analysis.**

| Survey Item   | Factor<br>1 | Factor<br>2 | Factor<br>3 |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| I believe the junior enlisted member is looking for special treatment.  | <b>.86</b>  |             |             |
| I believe the junior enlisted member is just trying to get people in trouble for something that isn't that serious.         | <b>.84</b>  |             |             |
| I believe the junior enlisted member should just ignore the jokes.  | <b>.83</b>  |             |             |
| I believe the junior enlisted member needs to lighten up.   | <b>.75</b>  |             |             |
| I believe the junior enlisted member is overreacting.   | <b>.68</b>  |             |             |
| I believe the junior enlisted member is courageous for reporting this situation.  | <b>-.60</b> | .42         |             |
| I would do nothing.   | <b>.55</b>  |             |             |
| I would provide appropriate resources to the junior enlisted member.  | <b>-.44</b> | .41         |             |
| I would initiate an investigation.  |             | <b>.73</b>  |             |
| I would help the junior enlisted member file a complaint.   |             | <b>.67</b>  |             |
| I believe the junior enlisted member has a valid complaint.   | -.41        | <b>.59</b>  |             |
| I would suggest that the junior enlisted member should get counseling from a Chaplain.                                      |             | <b>.44</b>  |             |
| I would counsel the junior enlisted member to discuss the situation with the junior enlisted member's immediate supervisor. |             |             | <b>.82</b>  |
| I would advise the junior enlisted member to solve the problem without official intervention.                               |             |             | <b>.65</b>  |

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